

Forest Service scopes restoration project near McCall to address invasive insects, recreation, and watershed health

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I recently went on a cross country ski outing near my home outside McCall, through the forest and up onto the ridge separating the Little Salmon River valley from the Goose Creek drainage. As I gazed across Goose Creek toward Brundage Mountain in fresh snow, the deep green of the douglas and grand fir forest highlighted an expanding elevational band of brown dead and dying subalpine fir running through the ski area and beyond, wrapping back around to the west and Granite Mountain.

The high elevation stands of subalpine fir are being severely impacted by the [balsam woolly adelgid](#) (BWA), an invasive species that arrived in North America around 1900 in New England and Canada, and was discovered near San Francisco in 1928. The balsam woolly adelgid is a sap-feeding insect that attacks true fir trees, including balsam, white, fraser, and subalpine fir. Repeated attacks weaken trees, cause twig gouting, kill branches, and eventually cause trees to die. We have no known natural biological deterrents and spraying is ineffective as the bugs live on the underside of needles and branches, avoiding direct contact with insecticides applied from above, as is often the case in forest settings. Ultimately, subalpine fir could follow a similar path as the [American chestnut](#), and be reduced from an invaluable tree species to an early successional-stage shrub by an introduced plant disease.



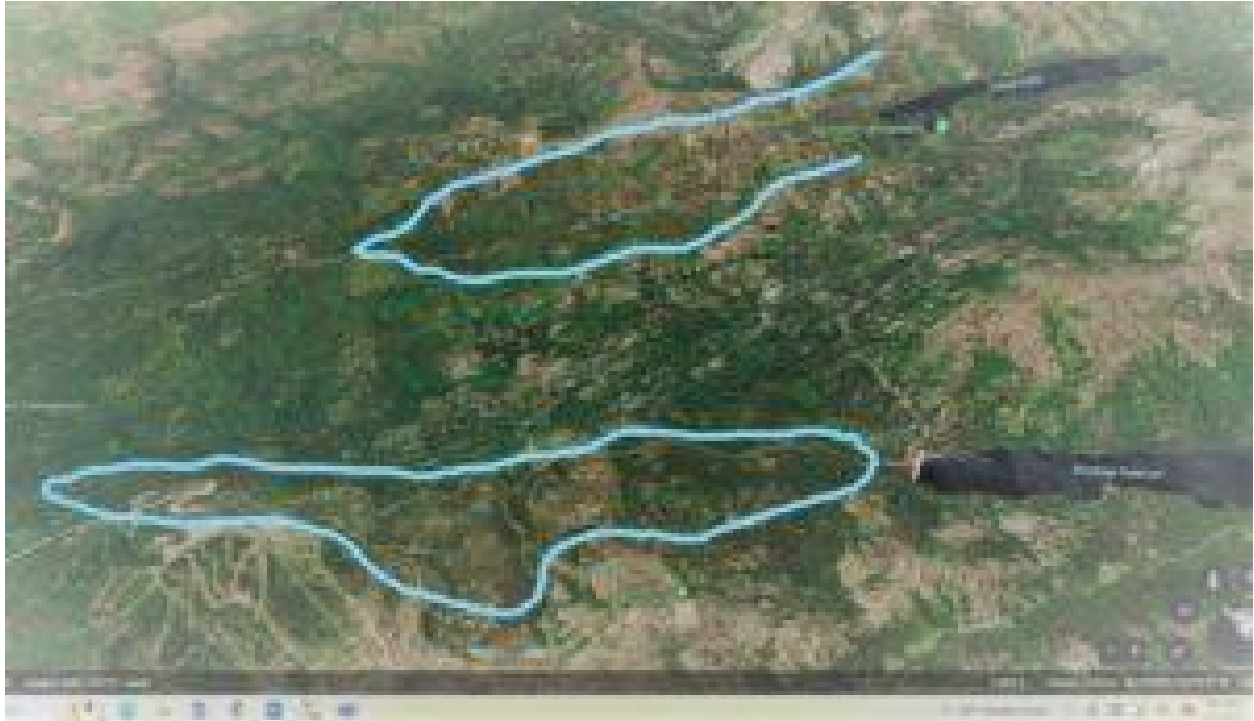
Dead and dying subalpine fir, caused by balsam woolly adelgid, near Brundage Mountain.
U.S.F.S. photo.

There is a growing concern throughout the West that dead and dying subalpine fir stands will lead to increased wildfire hazard, threaten infrastructure and communities, and negatively impact watershed health and wildlife habitats.

In order to address these and other issues, the Payette National Forest (PNF) is proposing the [Granite Goose Landscape Restoration Project](#), located on the McCall and New Meadows Ranger Districts north and east of New Meadows and north and west of McCall in Adams and Valley counties. The 39,918-acre project area incorporates lands managed by the Forest Service, the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL), and some privately owned parcels. The project is designed to reduce fuel loading adjacent to communities, maintain and improve conditions for forest vegetation and watershed health, and provide recreation improvements in a highly used area of the Payette National Forest.

Vegetation treatments include commercial thinning, salvage and sanitation of BWA-infected subalpine fir stands, shaded fuel breaks along major transportation routes, meadow encroachment treatments (using historical data to define meadow boundaries), regeneration/patch cuts to create openings that reduce connectivity and allow for replanting of lodgepole pine and other fire and drought-resistant species, and Whitebark pine treatments. These whitebark pine treatments are meant to improve

resilience and provide habitat for Clark's nutcrackers, a species critical to the survival of Whitebark pine, which was recently listed as [Threatened under the Endangered Species Act](#). The reintroduction of fire into the natural system through prescribed fire is also a key element of this restoration proposal.



Aerial shot of the Granite Goose project area. The elevation band of dead and dying subalpine fir is highlighted.

Proposed watershed improvements include the installation of two Aquatic Organism Passage (AOP) culverts to improve habitat connectivity for native Westslope cutthroat trout, decommissioning nearly 40 miles of unauthorized roads, alpine wet meadow restoration, streambank stabilization, the installation of barriers to prevent unauthorized travel in meadow areas, and the installation of exclusion fencing to protect wetland and riparian areas.

The agency is also proposing several recreation improvements, including but not limited to:

- Improvements to the non-motorized and motorized trail system
- Installation of several vault toilets
- Closure of 4 roads in Bear Basin to public motorized use, designating them as non-motorized trails
- Expansion of the Gordon Titus snowmobile parking lot
- Construction of 2 new parking lots in the Ecks Flat area

- Identifying and defining 40 dispersed campsites along the Goose Lake and Brundage Reservoir roads
- Improvements to the Brundage Reservoir boat ramps
- Extension of the current over-snow motorized closures for Granite Mountain from January 15 – March 31 to the full winter season



An overview of the heart of the project area. Ecoflight photo.

The Forest Service is currently accepting public comment on the scope of the project, including recommendations for making the project as successful as possible. The balsam woolly adelgid is altering this important ecosystem at a significant scale, and how we mitigate the potential impacts to those changes will shape the character and health of this forest.

We believe the project will be improved with the addition of a defined implementation timeline, appropriate separation between regeneration/patch cuts, and assessment of the visual impacts of the proposed treatments on the Meadows Valley and McCall. The Forest Service is accepting comments until March 10, 2023, through the project's [comment portal](#).

Reducing fire risk in our communities is a concern for many Idahoans, and addressing a significant ecological change as posed by the balsam woolly adelgid makes each of these decisions more critical. Our public lands are best managed when the public is involved. Now is your chance to provide input, help inform this proposal, and help restore forest health in West Central Idaho.